CSCanada
Studies in Literature and Language
Vol. 10, No. 2, 2015, pp. 63-67
DOI: 10.3968/6454

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]
ISSN 1923-1563[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

African Literature Still in the Dock: A Deconstructive Strategy for Eurocentric Hegemony

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Received 15 November 2014; accepted 6 January 2015
Published online 26 February 2015

Abstract

Some academic circles still harbor the view that European literature remains the best that is written, with all *subaltern* literary work patronizingly assumed to be awkward, mediocre, or inferior. In particular, Eurocentric charges are levelled against African literature on the grounds that it is oral, mono-thematic, mono-structural, hybrid, and mimetic. This paper provides a vital awareness of the debilitating effects of this kind of Eurocentric hegemonic discourse, thus decolonizing African literature and counteracting European attacks on African literary norms and values. To this effect, the paper argues that a key way for African writers to correct the perpetual lopsided and distorted view of their work is to deconstruct the Western hegemonic discourse and reject the biased criteria, norms, and standards of the so-called *great tradition*.

Key words: African literature; Euro-centrism; Hegemony; Hybridity; Deconstruction

Ben Zid, M. (2015). African Literature Still in the Dock: A Deconstructive Strategy for Eurocentric Hegemony. *Studies in Literature and Language, 10*(2), 63-67. Available from: http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/6454
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6454

INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed upon by mainstream critics that African literature has been and continues to be subjected to severe censure and marginalization at the hands of Eurocentric critics. These Eurocentric attacks are predicated on a belief that Africa represents the other for the West and is still the continent of the awkward, the illiterate, the uncivilized and the inferior. As Akoété Amouzou (2007) observes, Eurocentric critics have long held a "lopsided view of African literature and consider it primitive, because they have been using Western standards to evaluate it" (p.300). Hence, Africans are unworthy of recognition among the elite literati of the world and are unable to create aesthetic works of art. Accordingly, whenever these critics encounter an African literary masterpiece, they marginalize it, assuming it is patterned on some European literary model, thus bolstering their own sense of superiority. To spread their colonial idea that they are God's chosen people to civilize the "brutes" of Africa, these critics' main concern is to persuade Africans that they are inferior and to impede their struggle for creativity and independence. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) stated:

> The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious subjectivity. (pp.24-25)

African literature, indeed, has often been perceived by Eurocentric critics as the literature of those who do not have literature. Mainstream Western thinking views literature as something written; by implication, verbal art expanded orally is unauthentic. Hence a traditional tendency to associate African literature with *orature* (a term coined in the early seventies by the Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu) and to see this oral medium as awkward by comparison with the written one.

Eurocentric critics also maintain that *orature* is associated with improvisation, i.e., that it lacks contemplation and thinking in its literary processing. As Hunter succinctly nails it (2001):

> Because our entire system of literary value in England privileges the written as a fixed object, a printed text that remains stable,

> many people think of oral texts as naive and even childlike, and of oral techniques as simple-minded. There is also a tendency to think that the people who use oral skills are not as sophisticated as those skilled in the written word. (p.34)

Hence, their attacks concentrate on "the domains of the themes developed, the techniques of writing, the concepts, and the general philosophy of literary theory" (Amouzou, 2007, p.300). Among influential Eurocentric critics, Charles Larson points out that African novels in general, and Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* (1993) in particular, lack logic, rationality, and consistency, and that Tutuola's African novel "appears to be an inconsistency," adding that "if the trip to the dead's town takes ten years, why is barely more than a year involved for the return?" (Larson, 1972, pp.102-103).

These critics also attack African literature on other grounds. They accuse it of promoting superstition and magic, of dwelling much on unrealistic issues, ignoring real, universal, and human concerns. African literature, they say, is non-constructive, has no aims and tends to entertain rather than instruct and broaden the minds of its readership. The *Palm-Wine Drunkard*, by the Nigerian writer Amos Tutola, for instance, received harsh criticism from both Western and Nigerian critics because it tells the mythological story of a man who follows a palm-wine tapster into the land of the dead concentrating on "a world of magic, ghosts, demons and supernatural beings" and thus shows the African novel in a negative light by depicting a drunk, using Pidgin English, and promoting "the idea that Africans [are] superstitious" (Garuba, 2003, p.265).

Western critics also say that there is no written heritage from which African literature evolved or sufficient complexity to make it suitable for a world readership. Such accusations have led Eurocentric critics to claim possession of African literary work and its authors, also supporting their perception of superiority on the grounds of language since, they argue, it is through colonization and their own native language English that African writers are able to put their ideas into words.

The present study seeks to investigate perpetuated Eurocentric lopsided views on African novels and poems, showing how Afrocentric authors and critics have defended themselves and their work and how their main tool of resistance and defense has consisted of deconstructing and subverting Eurocentric views from within. The paper will also attempt to demonstrate how Afrocentric critics, novelists, and poets have refuted the concept of their literary inferiority, of their literature being possessed by westerners, and of the non-complexity of their work, basing their refutation on the fact that their opponents have never penetrated the world of African literature or touched on its motifs of creation.

1. THE AFRICAN NOVEL IN THE DOCK

The African novel has often been subjected to censure by Eurocentric critics striving to minimize its scope and deeming it to be the literature of the illiterate. These charges also stem from their ignorance that the form never existed before the European invasion of Africa. Among other perceived deficiencies, the most important is the immediacy of oral communication, which limits the chances of character development in the oral tale, and a charge that the oral tale has a thin narrative structure. The implication is that there is no parity or reciprocity between oral and written fictional forms and that the former is inferior to the latter.

Such a biased view arises from the application of the Western literary experience to Africa and turning a blind eye to the fact that Africa is not the West. In other words, Eurocentric critics seem to evaluate the African novel according to Western norms, as Roscoe (1971) showed when he stated:

> The novel as it is known in the west, precisely because it is a written form, has no history whatever in Africa … It is a literary import from Europe … It is not, in its nature, an African form. It is not a fact of the African past. (p.75)

Hence, in addition to being criticized for its oral form, the immediacy of oral communication, uncomplicated plot and characterization, and its thin narrative structure, Eurocentric critics also attack the African novel on the grounds of language, by appropriating to their national literature any works written in English by writers from outside their nation.

2. DECONSTRUCTING EUROCENTRIC HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE ON THE AFRICAN NOVEL

A quick glance at history shows that Africa has both oral and written antecedents to the novel and that the claims advanced by Eurocentric critics derive only from their desire to "impose Western norms" (Amouzou, 2007, p. 300), marginalize anything African, and ignore landmarks of the African heritage and cultures, which include literate civilizations in Nubia, Meroe, and Ethiopia. Also involved is a forgetfulness that Africa is the origin of all world arts and that the literary arts of Africa were taught in England, France, Germany, and Greece. This indeed was acknowledged by the Greek historian Herodotus in *The Persian Wars* where he argued that "opponents of African literature have no point in pursuing their hoity-toity aggression against Africans and their literary achievements" (As cited in Chinweizu et al., 1985, p.26).

Amouzou (2007) foregrounds a similar view when he argues that "African literature is an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures," that it "has its own traditions, models and norms," and that

it is "understandably different from European and other literatures" (p.330).

Chinweizu et al. (1985) similarly maintained that attacks on African literature have no solid background since both the oral and the written are narrative forms and that the alleged deficiency of the oral form is based on non-comparable forms. They also argue that if Eurocentric critics choose the African oral epic as a ground of comparison with the novel, instead of comparing the novel with the short story, they will not find any deficiencies:

> The importance of the requirement that comparison be made between comparable forms lies in this: it makes it harder for critics to indulge in vague misleading or inappropriately grounded claims in favor of either the written or oral mode and their forms. Such misleading or inappropriately grounded claims are regular grist for those critics who churn out disparagements on the head of the oral mode. (Chinweizu et al., 1985, p.35)

In response to Adrian Roscoe's Eurocentric view on the African novel by close reference and comparison with the Western model, Chinweizu et al. point out that Eurocentric critics "again misperceive the matter [and] that the novel, a bourgeois form of extended fictional narrative, has no history in pre-colonial Africa" (p.32). They added:

> There was written literature in pre-colonial Africa. And even if there had been such a bourgeoisie, its novel would hardly be expected to conform to the characteristics of the Western novel. Africa is simply not in the West. (p.30)

Furthermore, the charges of this narrative structure, undeveloped characters, and uncomplicated plots cannot be sustained against non-parabolic African tales when transcripted performances by masters of the genre of verbal art are examined. We can consider *The Race* by Feldman (1963), *The Dog and the Tortoise* by Finnegan (1970), and *The Great Race* by Creel (1960), which are three versions of the same tale. Feldman's version, for instance, is merely a bare-boned plot summary and contains nothing at all typical of a traditional narrative style—lacking the obligatory formula with which such stories begin and end. In a similar manner, Finnegan's version captures ideophones and dramatic voices in the story, including the opening and closing formula but downplaying aspects of the narrative structure. Creel's version, however, is rich with narrative embroidery, has arresting images, explanatory digressions, philosophical reflections on life, and a variety of tones and moods, refuting the premise on underdeveloped characters and thin narrative, since its plot is not as linear and uncomplicated as the two previous versions of the same story.

As for the language argument, it is important to note that language is not a crucial factor for determining the national literature to which a particular work belongs. Based on an African worldview, therefore, inclusion of a given literary work within a national literature should be determined by shared values and assumptions, a world outlook and other cultural essentials. Although language is a vehicle for expressing cultural values, it should not be viewed as their crucial generator and cannot be relied on to supply literary criteria. In addition to being a means of communication, language "is also a vehicle of culture, a signifier of tribal or national identity and pride, … a philosophy, history, ideology" and that "it is difficult to use a language without using some of the literary traditions that have grown up with that language" (Achebe, 1975, p.54).

Given the fundamental differences in values and experiences between two nations that use the same language, it is not sufficient to judge two works written in the same language according to the same criteria, since it is the elements of national ethos rather than language which supply the decisive evaluation criteria. This is the case for British, American, and Canadian literatures written in both English and French. That African literature is written in English and French does not give license to Eurocentric critics to evaluate it according to their values or norms, nor does it justify Adrian Roscoe's (1971) hegemonic claim that "if an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English letters as a whole, and can be scrutinized accordingly" (p. 105). According to Chinweizu et al. (1985), since nation and language are different, national, personal and cultural criteria are more important than language criteria in determining critical standards:

> In a pragmatic application of family resemblances, in order to decide what other works should be included in an evolving canon, the following are some of the most important considerations: a) the primary audience for whom the work is done; b) the cultural and national consciousness expressed in the work; whether through the author's voice or through the characters and their consciousness, habits, comportment and diction; c) the nationality of the writer, whether by birth or naturalization; d) the language in which the work is done. (pp.13-14)

It appears, then, that it is the audience for whom the work is written, rather than the work's language, which determines the nationality of both product and producer. To borrow Chinweizu et al.'s (1985) words:

> We must remind critics and readers alike … that there are none but imperialist grounds for insisting that non-British literatures, whether or not written in English, be judged by technical norms and moral values that are specifically British. Efforts to smuggle these British norms and values into the discourse by disguising them as English language criteria, or as criteria of the so-called Great Tradition, shall not be tolerated. (p.16)

2. THE GREAT TRADITION: LIBERATING AFRICAN POETRY FROM EUROCENTRIC HEGEMONY

Like the African novel, African poetry has also been attacked by Eurocentric critics on the same grounds

of language and orality. It is, they say, awkward since it includes no paradoxes, does not refer to universal myths, and is devoid of wit, humor, and the celebration of laughter and joy. On these grounds, it is viewed by the *great tradition* as mono-oriented in its resistance and protest against European hegemony and colonial power, and is accordingly poor in terms of theme, structure, and poetic technique. Such criticism seeks to devaluate African poetry, convert its readership, and use it as a tool to bolster their position in African colonized countries.

Contrary to Eurocentric bias, African poetry draws its power from what is said to be its source of weakness, namely its use in resisting hegemonic powers. For Africans, indeed, poetry is first and foremost a commitment and a means of defense against colonization, and therefore it is legitimate that African poetry is not written merely for the sake of art and aesthetic effects but rather for resisting hegemonic powers, stirring Africans to express their feelings and fight back against the invaders. As George Rebelo echoes in *Poem*:

Here my body was tortured
because it refused to bend
to invaders
Here my mouth was wounded
Because it dared to sing
My people's freedom,
Come, tell me all this, my brother
And later I will forge simple words
Which even the children can understand
Words which will enter every house
Like the wind
And fall like red hot embers
On our peoples' soul
(As cited in Malan, 2007, p. 166)

Moreover, the view that African poetry is mono-thematic and mono-structural can also be refuted, since it is divided into three main categories: poetry stimulating violence against the oppressors, poetry using words as metaphors of violence, and poetry that is itself violent. From this tripartite division, it is obvious that African poetry evokes myriad issues in a very creative manner, and that African poets have imitated Western poetic features and standards of aesthetics only in terms of language, even though this imitation seems imposed by the circumstance of having to address the colonizers in a language and logic they can understand.

Yet, language imitation has not denied poets' inspiration from their own "African home soil" (Chinweizu, 1985, p.3) and their rich "reservoir of African values" (Amouzou, 2007, p.333) associated with the environment, the ecology, racial and political resources as a means of expression, resistance, and protest. Insisting that African literature has its own distinctive values, Chinweizu et al. (1985) encapsulated this position when they recommended that African writers derive inspiration from "the vital nourishment of African traditions and home soil … the vibrancy, gusto, and absolute energy of African oral poetry which is so firmly and deeply rooted in the African home soil" (p.3).

Hence it can be seen that elements of the environment such as fire, herbage, rocks, and trees of the forest are indeed employed by African poets. They are used, for example, to evoke a major theme which is how their ancestors are revered and how it is that, in traditional thinking, the "dead are not dead." Consider the lines from Birago Diop's "Les Souffles":

Ceux qui sont morts ne sont jamais partis:
Ils sont dans l'Ombre qui s'éclaire
Et dans l'ombre qui s'épaissit.
Les Morts ne sont pas sous la Terre
Ils sont dans l'Arbre qui frémit,
Ils sont dans le Bois qui gémit,
Ils sont dans l'Eau qui coule,
Ils sont dans l'Eau qui dort,
Ils sont dans la Case, ils sont dans la Foule:
Les Morts ne sont pas morts.
(as cited in Leurres & Lueurs, 1963, pp.173-174)

Here is my English translation of the above extract:

Those who died have never passed away
They are in the illuminated shade
And in the shadow that thickens
The dead are not under the earth:
They are in the light that is switched off,
They are in the shaft that shudders
They are in the wood that groans
They are in the water that flows
They are in the sleeping water
They are in the compartment
They are in the crowd
The dead are not dead.
("Whispers," as cited in Diop, 1963, pp.173-174)

There are now countless African poems that depend more on metaphors and imagery rising from the local African setting, traditions, and beliefs than on the English language as a tool of description and a means of protest and resistance. In the African tradition, for instance, the river becomes a god whose anger falls mercilessly on whoever spits or intends to kill its children— the fish. It is not surprising, therefore, that African literary genres owe their origin or development to traditional environmental concerns including hunters' songs and dirges recited at the funeral of animals like the lion, the elephant, or the buffalo. Consider, for example, Wole Soyinka's *Season,* where the poet uses a striking metaphor comparing "pollen" with "mating-time" portraying the beauty of nature and showing how he is inspired from and enamored by the magnitude of the African natural scenery around him:

Rust is ripeness, rust.
And the wilted corn-plume.
Pollen is mating-time when swallows
Weave a dance.
Thread corn-stalks in winged
Streaks of light. And we loved to hear
Spliced phrases of the wind, to hear

Rasps in the field, where corn-leaves
Pierce likes bamboo slivers.
(As cited in Killam & Rowe, 2000, p.275)

It must be inferred, then, that together with the English language as a means of expression and resistance for African authors, the local African setting has been and was always equally crucial in determining choice of language for protest. In other words, although the language modern African writers have used to voice their resistance and protest is European in origin, the metaphors have remained environmentally African, tropical, agrarian, and a "combination of national and social things which condition the well-being of people" (Rosalind, 1994, p.1).

CONCLUSION

The present paper has examined the background on Eurocentric attacks levelled against African literature and revealed how critics have imposed their Western literary criteria and values on it, either to possess it or accuse it of being inferior, awkward, mimetic, and devoid of a written heritage. Using a language argument, it has been suggested these critics have also attempted to annex African literature, turning a blind eye to the fact that, in addition to language, other factors—culture, history, philosophy, thought etc.—play a crucial role in deciding the identity of a literary work.

Another important concern of this study has been to demonstrate that Eurocentric criticism first and foremost sought to legitimize European colonization and domination over Africa, maintaining that African literature focuses only on supernatural matters as a theme and has no complex structure in terms of plot, characters, and narrative technique.

It has been the contention of this study that the most efficient strategy for decolonizing African literature from Eurocentric hegemony and counteracting attacks on African literary standards is, according to mainstream African scholars and writers, to deploy the various weapons of deconstruction, abandon their fear and shame, regain a sense of pride, refute European literary values and norms, force Eurocentric critics to keep their hands off African literature and think of their works as autonomous, with their own norms, values, and traditions, which are independent of those in Europe or any other part of the world. As Langston Hughes puts it:

> We, creators of the new black generation want to express our black personality, without shame or fear. If this pleases the whites, much better. If not, it does not matter. We know that we are very beautiful, and also very ugly. The tam-tam weeps, and the tam-tam laughs. If this pleases the black people, much the better. If not, it does not matter. (As cited in Masolo, 1976, p.15)

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